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Dossier Society: Value Choices in the Design of National Information Systems by Kenneth C. Laudon
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This publication is a collection of sixteen original articles published as a supplement to volume 5 of *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*. The editors, who are experienced in initiating end user searching programs in health science libraries and are strong advocates of the service, wish to "cover the larger context of end user searching, such as personal information management and online education, that far exceeds the sometimes oversimplified perspective offered by the computer industry" (p. ix). The supplement "consolidates the viewpoints of both information specialists and end users" (p. x). The editors largely succeed, although this expensive work should be considered a compilation of viewpoints; a holistic structure and a corresponding sense of editorial synthesis are lacking.

The contributions are organized into three sections; each is introduced by a very brief and largely enumerative comment. "The Environment of End User Searching" describes the evolution of the end user searching movement and its present characteristics and represents some of the pertinent administrative, managerial, and, especially, user training concerns. The individual papers are not much different from those appearing in our professional journals. The compilation is convenient and the section, constituting in its seven contributions approximately half the text of the book, is the most valuable of the three. It highlights the impact and present influence of end user searching on health sciences librarianship. E. Horak's paper on the relationship of end user searching and health science education and B. Snow's piece on end user training are especially welcome.

"End User Searching Programs" comprises five papers detailing how individual health science libraries have implemented end user searching; such information is readily available elsewhere. However, the article by V. Glasgow and G. Foreman does include useful data that demonstrate the potential long-term success of an end user searching service.

"The End User's Viewpoint," the third section, might have been the most interesting of the book. However, this section in particular seems to lack editorial input, and its papers do not impart any special sense of the value of end user searching to the health professional.

This book is, nonetheless, a useful orientation to end user searching for any librarian, medical or otherwise, considering implementation of such a service. The contributors emphasize end user searching as offered via vendors or database producers, rather than by means of locally mounted data bases (for example, mini-MEDLINE) possibly impractical for small libraries. The work as a whole does not dwell on the relative merits or demerits of particular systems. The long (circa 175 entries), well-annotated bibliography is valuable; in addition, the individual contributions include references. The book concludes with an index and glossary of terms.

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Dossier Society: Value Choices in the Design of National Information Systems. By KENNETH C. LAUDON. CORPS (Computing, Organizations, Policy, and Society) Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. Pp. xi+421. ISBN 0-231-06188-9.

Is there a politics of computing? Surprisingly, few political scientists would argue the affirmative, preferring instead to view information technologies as if they were apolitical. But in *Dossier Society*, Kenneth Laudon makes a persuasive case

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that there is indeed a politics of computing, particularly with respect to its adoption and use within the public sector. According to Laudon, those who are applying new computer and telecommunication technologies to public information systems are doing nothing less than shaping public policy. They are not simply technicians, implementing policy in neutral ways—in Laudon's words, "Whenever bureaucrats in Washington meet to design national information systems, in reality a small constitutional convention is in progress" (p. 5). But what kind of constitution is being written by the Washington bureaucrats?

Laudon's general thesis is that the designs and uses of new computing and telecommunications systems are moving us closer to what he calls a "dossier society." He defines this as a society in which relationships between governors and the governed are more mediated than interpersonal (that is, increasingly based on a "data image" rather than face-to-face contact) and centralized rather than dispersed among fragmented governmental branches, levels, and jurisdictions (p. 4).

The author anchors this thesis in a detailed case study of computerized criminal history (CCH) systems in the United States, focusing on projects and systems developed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), primarily its National Computerized Criminal History System. Laudon constructs his case studies from a variety of data, including personal observations and interviews, responses to a state survey, official records and documents, and an analysis of a sample of records from two federal CCH systems.

In this context, he concludes that the FBI is supporting the development of CCH systems that move the United States closer to a dossier society. The FBI is doing so by designing "broadband" systems that will collect, create, and disseminate more information about more people in automated files. In addition, advances in computer and telecommunications technologies and the development of techniques for matching and integrating data bases are facilitating greater centralization of CCH systems—that is, the development of a national information system.

This movement toward a dossier society is being fueled by national policy agendas that place a high priority on reducing crime. But, Laudon argues, existing CCH systems are not even achieving their stated aim of crime reduction. In fact, these systems might "increase the incidence of crime by denying employment and promotion" (p. 8), in addition to having other negative social consequences on individual privacy, due process, the relative power of citizens vis-à-vis large bureaucracies, and, most generally, the degree to which decisions about individuals are made on the basis of data lodged in automated files rather than impressions gained through face-to-face contact. And reliance on computerized data is likely to affect decisions adversely, since the data in automated files are often ambiguous, incomplete, or inaccurate. Looking toward the future, Laudon attempts to demonstrate that FBI designs for building more integrated broadband systems will exacerbate rather than solve these problems by erecting a system "that represents the alternative furthest from an ideal system" (p. 327). His ideal system is "a centralized file operated by the FBI or another federal agency specifically targeted to the small group of violent and/or serious criminals. . . . The system would contain the names of 1–2 million individuals and would operate under new federal legislation guaranteeing data quality standards, severely restricting the employment use of this information, establishing centralized responsibility and authority, and requiring strong management oversight of contributing state and local systems as well as broad public participation in its operation" (p. 326).

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Adding insult to injury, Laudon argues that responsible officials within the FBI know the flaws in their own designs. He explains this pathological outcome as a consequence of bureaucratic politics, arguing that the plans of FBI officials depart from the ideal because plans have been shaped more by the need to maintain and enhance "their own personal influence" than by the merits of the case (pp. 350–51).

Another major theme, woven through the book and called out by the subtitle, is the notion that numerous value choices are involved in the design and use of information systems. Lists of questions are posed to the reader, such as the following: "Should a convicted nineteen-year-old car thief be employed as a school janitor when he is twenty-five" (p. 15)? (Who would be opposed?) Laudon uses this rhetorical device to show the many ways in which the design and use of information systems can be tied to fundamental social choices and outcomes. And the questions also serve to demonstrate that privacy is a widely shared value in American society. Unfortunately, the book does not wholeheartedly pursue this theme to the next step of showing the numerous conflicts between the value of privacy and other legitimate social values, such as public health, safety, and economic well-being. It is because of these conflicts that Americans will say they care about privacy at the same time that they knowingly relinquish degrees of it in order to pursue other objectives, such as preventing the spread of contagious disease, reducing crime, or buying on credit. Laudon is not unaware of these trade-offs. In fact, they form one reason why he is so keen to make the case that CCH systems do not achieve their intended objectives. But it is difficult to understand the erosion of personal privacy without facing the extent to which this value is in conflict with other equally or more socially valued objectives.

In developing these arguments, the book covers a great deal of substantive ground and blends several modes of analysis. It is introduced by a general discussion of competing perspectives on the role of information technology in society. It then moves to a description of computerized criminal history systems at the federal, state, and local levels; discusses their use by the police and courts as well as by non–criminal justice users, such as prospective employers; presents a personal perspective on the social impact of CCH systems; provides an overview of the policy choices that could shape the design, control, and impacts of CCH systems; and prescribes a set of policy options, including new privacy policies, aimed at minimizing the negative social consequences of CCH systems. Finally, Laudon employs a variety of perspectives on decision making to explain why prevailing policy choices are at odds with his prescriptions.

The book is focused on evaluating and prescribing policy as well as on theory building in the social sciences. There are difficulties inherent in efforts at blending prescriptive policy advocacy with research that seeks to describe and interpret events in a more disinterested manner. For one, the book represents, to a great extent, the personal perspective of the author. Even though it happens to be the perspective of a social scientist who has conducted extensive fieldwork and policy research on criminal justice information systems, it can get in the way. Take as an example the way in which Laudon is led to defend his policy prescriptions by citing bureaucratic "politics" as an explanation of why the FBI is pursuing a course of action that differs from his recommendation. Also, his desire to address policy-relevant issues often seems to drive him beyond the reach of his data. But the limitations of the data are understandable. In the best of circumstances, it would be difficult for a team of social scientists to marshal the empirical evidence necessary to ground fully the conclusions of this book.

What is more bothersome is the number of key points that are anchored on

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vague or ambiguous sources. Frequently, empirical generalizations are claimed to be supported by "interviews" with "actual intended users" (p. 222) or "criminal justice decision makers" (p. 216), leaving the reader to trust the author's choice of questions, respondents, and interpretations. Some ambiguity is necessary to protect the confidentiality of the author's sources. But in too many cases, the references are too ambiguous for the reader to judge their value. Also, numerous references are made to "earlier statements and research" (p. 216) and "prior research" (p. 216) that are not specifically cited, discussed, or directly confronted. For example, key studies of the impact of CCH systems are alluded to and often criticized but never precisely described or even referenced beyond broad claims that "research shows" (p. 199).

These flaws draw force from Laudon's conclusions, but they do not lessen the otherwise rich set of cases or detract from the significance of the questions posed. In the 1960s, landmark studies of the impact of computing on privacy made a convincing case that the introduction of computers did not fundamentally alter the record-keeping practices of large organizations in ways that threatened the privacy and civil liberties of the public (for example, Alan F. Westin and Michael Baker, *Databanks in a Free Society* [New York: Quadrangle, 1972]). In light of such findings, subsequent debate focused greater emphasis on whether computing altered the potential for abuse (for example, James B. Rule, D. McAdam, L. Stearns, and D. Uglow, *The Politics of Privacy* [New York: Elsevier, 1980]). Laudon builds further on these developments within the privacy literature, asking the following question: Has the computerization and linkage of increasingly large and distributed data bases lessened the ability of anyone to control their quality and use? Can those who have access to these systems be held accountable? What values and goals are driving the development of public information systems?

Laudon's formulation and provocative treatment of key questions concerning the politics of information systems should gain a wide audience for this book. It will undoubtedly be controversial among those involved with the development of criminal justice information systems. More generally, scholars and graduate students in a variety of disciplines would find the case material to be a rich basis for exploring themes within the literature on computing and society. For example, in describing the thousands of local, regional, state, and federal criminal history information systems of police, court, and correctional institutions, the book provides a classic example of what Joseph Weizenbaum called "incomprehensible systems" (Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason* [San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976]). And the book, which is quite handsomely printed, should be on the shelves of both practitioners and academics interested in privacy as well as the social and political aspects of information technology more generally.

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The MARC Format and Life Cycle Tracking at the National Archives: A Study. A Report of the Archival Research and Evaluation Staff to the Archivist of the United States. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1986.

The MARC/Life Cycle Tracking Project tackled an ambitious agenda. Over the course of eighteen months, the project staff investigated the need for an auto-

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